

# Processes of Radicalization and Polarization in the Context of Transnational Islamist Terrorism

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The present special issue brings together papers that focus on relevant theoretical perspectives and empirical research concerning individual and collective processes of radicalization, and social dynamics and conflicts associated with them. It also examines strategies to prevent the initiation of such processes and thereby connects analyses and transfer. Eight articles advance the current state of the art with regard to three aspects of radicalization within the context of Islamist terrorism, namely: 1) radicalization as a relational process; 2) social challenges and the role of foreign policy; and 3) prevention strategies. Together they represent important current empirical studies and point to directions where research is urgently needed.

**Keywords:** Radicalization, violent dyads, post-traumatic growth, cultural threat, CVE, online propaganda

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Since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, Islamist terrorism has witnessed different phases of development. In its latest stage, Islamist propaganda and its growingly professionalized dissemination fascinate young people across the Western world. This has led to new phenomena of online and offline radicalization and attracted numerous followers across the globe. Even though the Islamic State (ISIS) and associated groups have now been largely defeated militarily, radicalization processes and dynamics are still ongoing in many societies. As well as large numbers of returnees from Syria and Iraq, Western societies have to deal with a broad circle of sympathizers and supporters – some of them with close relationships to (neo-)Salafist milieus, some with per-

sonal grievances, and some potentially suffering from psychiatric disorders. Although terrorism can be considered one of the most pressing challenges for Western societies today, we are a long way from understanding – still less preventing – radicalization.

The search for explanations for the motives, dynamics and processes underlying radicalization has generated an intense field of radicalization research to which numerous disciplines contribute. A review of the current radicalization and terrorism literature reveals that no single discipline on its own successfully maps the complexity of radicalization (Schoorman 2018). This is because radicalization processes almost always result from a multifactorial interaction of risk factors,

access routes and triggering events, often at various levels (i.e., individual, group and society) (Doosje et al. 2016; McCauley and Moskalenko 2008). The contributions to this focus section aim to contribute to this interdisciplinary push and, above all, to illuminate the dynamics and mechanisms of radicalization and assess a number of the available prevention strategies.

To address some of the critical unanswered questions, the Volkswagen Foundation funded the Institute for Interdisciplinary Research on Conflict and Violence to host the International Herrenhauser Symposium “Processes of Radicalization and Polarization in the Context of Transnational Terrorism: Interdisciplinary Research and Public Implications”. The symposium took place in Hannover, Germany, in November 2016. The aim of the symposium was to synthesize pertinent scientific findings on radicalization processes and their social and political contexts from an interdisciplinary and internationally comparative perspective, as well as to examine practical experience and relevant topics in the public dialogue between science and practice. The perceived necessity for the present focus section was raised during this symposium. The contributions exemplify a scope of research questions, approaches, and methodologies for the study of radicalization in the context of transnational Islamist terrorism ranging from theoretical advancements in radicalization processes to description and assessment of prevention strategies. While we do acknowledge the need to understand different forms of radicalization and terrorism (right-wing terrorism, left-wing terrorism, etc.) from a comparative perspective, we decided to limit our scope to Islamist radicalization and terrorism.

### Radicalization as a Relational Process

The first set of articles focus on radicalization as a relational process by which individuals adopt extreme political, social, and/or religious ideals that may motivate them to pursue violent behavior. In “Killing in Pairs: Radicalization Patterns of Violent Dyads” O’Conner, Malthaner, and Lindekilde (2018, this issue) present the unique character of dyadic radicalization using the relational approach (Malthaner and Lindekilde 2017; Lindekilde, O’Connor, and Schuurman 2017; Lindekilde, Malthaner, and O’Connor 2018). Building on the literature on so-called “lone actors” and small group radicalization, they highlight the differences between dyadic radicalization, radicalization of lone actors, and group terrorism. To il-

lustrate the mechanisms of radicalization, they analyse three different instances of dyadic radicalization: non-kin, fraternal and spousal. Their main analysis is based on an in-depth case study of an attempted terrorist attack in Germany in 2006 carried out by two friends. The authors analysed primary and restricted documents as well as an interview with one of the perpetrators. To validate their results, the authors also analysed extensive secondary sources on the Boston Marathon bombing (15 April 2013) and the San Bernardino shootings (2 December 2015). Their analysis delineates five mechanisms of dyadic radicalization; dyadic initiation, unfreezing, encapsulation, moral shock and indirect encouragement cues.

In the second article entitled “Neighbourhood Effects on Jihadist Radicalisation in Germany? Some Case Based Remarks”, Jörg Hüttermann (2018, this issue) examines a situation where about twenty young people left a small former mining settlement named Dinslaken-Lohberg to fight with Al Nusra and ISIS. They drew great public attention, with media reports about “members” of what was termed the “Lohberg Brigade” killed in the fighting, or in air strikes by the anti-ISIS coalition, or in spectacular suicide attacks claiming many victims. The article addresses the question of how a neighbourhood can affect the emergence and persistence of radicalization to jihadist neo-Salafism. The author shows that explaining space-related radicalization processes means more than adding up spatial factors. Where each spatial factor contributes to strengthening the others, all together constitute an emergence-promoting milieu.

The elements that enabled the emergence of the jihadist group are in turn stabilized by the emerging jihadist milieu. Once it exists, the jihadist group (for example) feeds conspiracy narratives on both sides (the autochthonous and the Turkish migrant milieu). The Muslims believe that the German intelligence services were behind the “Lohberg Brigade” while the established believe that all Muslims are covert jihadists. The jihadists, or the myths surrounding them, are like the keystone in a Gothic buttress: it is the keystone that stabilises the pillars that support it.

If we are to understand radicalization, we cannot examine it as a process occurring in a vacuum. To fully grasp radicalization processes, one must not concentrate exclusively on the individual and their inner characteristics, thoughts and emotions, or solely on the social context, but take an interac-

tive approach where radicalization is perceived as the result of the interaction between the individual, the immediate social milieu, society at large, political actors, state control organs, and the internet. The role of stigmatization, discrimination, and misrecognition of minorities in processes of radicalization, or the escalating spirals of violence in conflicts with political opponents (mutual radicalization; Moghaddam 2018) are examples of potential mechanisms underlying such interactions.

### **Social Challenges and the Role of Policy**

The second set of articles explore macro- and micro-social factors that can lead individuals to support or even themselves engage in confrontational and violent behaviour, or even terrorism: foreign policy and perceived threat to one's own culture. The contribution by Clark McCauley (2018, this issue) is entitled: "Explaining Homegrown Western Jihadists: The Importance of Western Foreign Policy". McCauley argues that, in addition to traditional explanations in terms of a powerful jihadist ideology and harsh experiences of Muslims in Western countries (in terms of discrimination and socio-economic challenges), Western foreign policy, in particular Western interventions in Muslim countries, is a third factor that contributes to radicalization. He offers support for these ideas by presenting data from surveys of US and European Muslims, and by describing case histories of jihadist plots for attacks in the United States. The data show that Muslims in both the United States and Europe experience grievances about Western foreign policies and perceive the "war on terror" as a war on Islam, and that these two factors are positively correlated. Data from another source, namely interviews with CVE practitioners, indicate that the practitioners believe it is important to address Muslim grievances relating to Western foreign policy. Taken together, these findings show that it is important to acknowledge and address the role of Muslim grievances over Western foreign policy in order to understand support for jihadist ideologies and jihadist violence in Western countries.

The next article articulates how an interactive approach can lead to a better understanding of relations between groups, as groups can sometimes fuel each other's violent behaviour (Reicher and Haslam 2016). Obaidi, Thomsen, and Bergh (2018, this issue) argue in "They Think We Are a Threat to Their Culture: A Meta-Cultural Threat Fuels Willing-

ness and Endorsement of Extremist Violence against the Cultural Outgroup" that meta-cultural threats elicit endorsement and willingness to engage in violent extremism against the cultural outgroup, in both the majority and minority groups. Meta-cultural threats occur where are members of an outgroup perceive the culture of the ingroup as a symbolic threat to their own culture. To test their assumptions Obaidi, Thomsen, and Bergh conducted three experimental studies. In the first two, they manipulated how the Danish and Swedish majority groups depict the Muslim culture (backward and incompatible with the majority culture). These meta-threats to their own culture significantly increased the Muslim minority's endorsement of violent extremism as well as intentions to engage in violent behaviors against the West. In the third experiment, presenting Muslims as threats to Danish culture increased non-Muslim Danish participants' endorsement of ethnic persecution of Muslims. The authors conclude that the results highlight the similarity of the mechanisms underlying endorsement of and engagement in violent extremism for Muslim and non-Muslim Europeans and support recent theoretical suggestions of mutual radicalization (Eatwell 2006; Moghaddam 2018, Reicher and Haslam 2016).

In a third paper entitled "Can Societies Experience Post-Traumatic Growth after a Terror Attack?" Doosje, van der Veen, and Klaver (2018, this issue) explore the influence of terror attacks on political, institutional, and social trust in European countries. Specifically, based on the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, predicting that traumatic events can cause people to "build their enduring personal resources, ranging from physical and intellectual resources to social and psychological resources" (Frederickson 2001, 219), Doosje, van der Veen, and Klaver explore whether societies can experience post-traumatic growth after experiencing terrorist attacks. They specifically looked at post-traumatic growth in terms of government, operationalized as an increase in political and institutional trust, and community, operationalized as increase in social trust. They analysed data (N= 75,805) from the European Social Survey in thirteen countries (Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Finland, Hungary, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom). They examined three time points; the pre-measurement was selected no more than two years before the terror attack, post-measure-

ment 1 was selected within one year of the terrorist attack, and post-measurement 2 was selected at least one year after post-measurement 1. Although some countries did show unique patterns, in general, results did not support the notion of post-traumatic growth. Overall, levels of trust did not increase after major terror attacks. Their results thus question the idea that post-traumatic growth can advance trust (political, institutional, social), at least in the examined European sample.

### From Understanding to Preventing Radicalization

Security measures alone are not able to effectively control the phenomenon of Islamist radicalization and jihadist violence (King et al. 2018). These efforts need to be supplemented with scientifically based prevention, risk-assessment, and de-radicalization measures. Accordingly, experiences with existing prevention and intervention programmes need to be evaluated. As online propaganda has the potential to feed into radicalization processes, striving to control or prevent this influence is one of the cornerstones of preventing the spread of radical ideologies.

The third set of articles contributes to the essential literature on assessment of prevention programs. The European Radicalization Awareness Network highlights the lack of empirical evidence for the effectiveness of prevention programmes based on critical media literacy (RAN 2017). To address this gap, in “Critical Media Literacy and Islamist Online Propaganda: The Feasibility, Applicability and Impact of Three Learning Arrangements”, Schmitt, Rieger, Ernst, and Roth (2018, this issue) advance and empirically test a primary prevention tool, the CONTRA school programme, which aims to foster critical media literacy (Hobs 2016) concerning online extremist propaganda. The programme is based on three components: 1) awareness, referring to fundamental mindfulness of the presence of Salafist propaganda on the internet; 2) reflection, referring to the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to critically reflect on whether particular content is or is not extremist propaganda on the basis of specific criteria; 3) empowerment, referring to confidence in the ability to detect propaganda, engage in social discourses, and position oneself against the ideologies. Using a convergent parallel and mixed method design (Cresswell 2014), the authors evaluate the effectiveness of such an approach. An experimental and a control condition were assessed at two

time points – pretest and posttest – using a survey design, combined with videographical behavioral observation and expert interviews with the responsible teachers. Quantitative analysis of the survey data revealed significant differences in pupils’ awareness, but no significant difference in reflection and empowerment. The authors elaborate on these results using the videographical and interview data. Their observations highlight the need not only to develop such evidence-based prevention methods but also to pay particular attention to the teachers or practitioners who are expected or responsible to implement these methods.

The contribution by Orla Lehane (2018, this issue), “Dealing with Frustration: A Grounded Theory Study of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Practitioners”, examines the prevention of violent extremism through the perspective of CVE practitioners (as the people who are in close contact with people with radical ideas). Among the thirty interviewees in this study, all CVE practitioners, there were former (violent) extremists, youth workers, psychologists, artists, writers, musicians, imams, and NGO staff from various countries (Denmark, Ireland, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States). This approach produced in fascinating insights: CVE practitioners often experience how their own personal experiences affect their approaches to their work. Often, they experience frustration with the (lack of) government initiatives for countering violent extremism and as a result are motivated to address the issue themselves, even without proper funding. This contribution makes clear that a grounded theory approach, focusing on what activities CVE practitioners actually engage in, is a useful tool for examining prevention practices.

Another manner in which people can use experiences and stories in CVE is described by Frischlich, Rieger, Anna and Bente. In “The Power of a Good Story: Narrative Persuasion in Extremist Propaganda and Videos against Violent Extremism” (2018, this issue), they examine the central role of narratives in extremist propaganda and CVE stories (Braddock 2015; Corman 2011; Frischlich 2018). Specifically, they conducted a laboratory and a survey experiment to test whether narrativity plays a pivotal role in the effectiveness of (countering) violent extremist ideas and directly compare the narrativity within the propaganda and within the CVE videos. Their results confirmed the critical role of narrativity in extremist and CVE videos, as it significantly increased persuasive processing of both (change in agreement with presented claims) and

promoted amplification of the video messages. It is important to note that the role of narrativity in increasing amplification was mediated by identification, appeal and cognitive inducement. The results also showed that narrativity does not increase attraction to extremists versus counter-extremists, a result deserving future research.

## Outlook

From the articles presented in this special issue, it is evident that there is a broad spectrum of perspectives and angles to the issue at hand. Political scientists focus on the societal and political dimension, sociologists on the group in relation to other groups, and psychologists on how the individual is shaped by the social context. No single focus alone can explain radicalization and terrorism. Rather, the multi-faceted nature of the issue underlines the importance of combining insights from various disciplines in an overall picture.

The articles highlight the different methodologies while addressing diverse questions related to radicalization and terrorism. One important direction the field can take is to adopt more multi-method approaches combining different methodologies (for example ethnographic work with experimental studies; interviews with survey studies). Such in-depth analysis of a research question, a model, or an intervention/prevention strategy provides an exhaustive description of the phenomena, along with causal evidence for the suggested relationships.

The first set of articles show that radicalization is always a social process that is unfolding and changing over time depending on forms of social embeddedness and interactions of the actors involved. By exploring the development and consolidation of radical milieus and the interactions of accomplices in the run up to terrorist attacks, the contributions show that interpersonal processes are highly relevant when it comes to creating new spaces of possibility for political violence. They shift the focus from an overemphasis on individual pathways and dispositions towards a greater consideration of relational dynamics within processes of radicalization.

The second set of articles, examining the social challenges of stigmatization and the galvanizing role of foreign policy, shifts the investigative focus away from the minority Muslim communities to the behaviour of majority groups and the potential consequences. This shift highlights the inter-group processes underlying radicalization processes and extends

an invitation to scholars in the field of inter-group processes and the field of radicalization and terrorism to initiate an open discussion and collaborations.

The third set of contributions, dealing with prevention strategies, calls for scholars and practitioners to pay particular attention to the assessment of the various prevention strategies implemented in various European countries and beyond. A critical review of such assessments would identify promising avenues for improving the current prevention strategies.

In sum, although the field of radicalization and terrorism has made much progress within the past few decades, much is yet to be uncovered and awaits researchers' and practitioners' attention. As guest editors of this focus section, we hope that the articles we have selected not only provide a summary of the state of the art in the field of radicalization and terrorism, but also motivate our scholars to seek new horizons of multi-disciplinary theory and multi-method projects to expand our understanding.

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